DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 703 FL 026 847

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TITLE	Why Learn French for Business in 2001?
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Business Communication; Foreign Countries; *French; International Trade; Second Language Instruction; *Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS	France; Non European Francophone Areas

ABSTRACT

This essay makes the case for why it is worth learning French for business purposes, even though it is acknowledged that English is increasingly the lingua franca of international business, science, technology, and the Internet. It is asserted that French is still the dominant language in some important markets, and being able to conduct business in French will give the user a significant edge in dealing with French or Francophone customers. (KFT)

Why Learn French for Business in 2001?

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ED 455 703

On the eve of this third millennium, one may remark that, within a very short time, globalization has transformed the international order and that the world really is becoming the planetary village predicted by the famous Canadian communications theoretician Marshall McLuhan in his book The Medium is the Message in 1967. Referring to the Marconi era— which in his opinion, succeeded the Gutenberg era—he alluded to the spread of the new electronic media that radio and television were, and which should have enabled listeners and viewers to throw down borders, receive broadcasts from the entire world, and if need be, standing up to unjust laws.

Since then, in communications, things have been accelerating: a major step was taken with the appearance of the fax, then with I.T., but most of all it has been the Internet which has caused a veritable revolution in these past few years, a phenomenon, according to Michel Serres, "whose influence and promises go beyond—far beyond—the industrial revolution, comparing itself more to such culture shocks as the appearance of writing in the fertile crescent or the invention of printing in Renaissance western Europe."

The Internet's effect is to accelerate not only the rate of electronic correspondence exchange, but also to accustom users to reduce their response time dramatically; this in turn demands increased skills in the art of communication.

But a fundamental question must be asked: which language should senders and receivers communicate in?

It is clear that the United States' technological advance in information superhighways has allowed English to exercise a dominant position since the beginning of this adventure, and to impose itself today as a lingua franca for international trade, technology and science on a worldwide level.

Admittedly, few barriers have gone up to hinder this increase in power of English—other languages have given no sign of resistance up to now.

Concerning the French language, its decline has increasingly picked up pace since the second half of the 20th century, even though it may have seemed from

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its place in history destined to play the role of international language bybeing the only European tongue able to lay claim to a planetary destiny.

What also must be included in this acknowledgement is that, for several decades now, major firms have been unable to realize that they have been under pressure to accept "the waning of the French language" and have not had the desire to gauge the consequences stemming from their choice.

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In this context, does the learning of French remain relevant and, if so, what assets can be seen in it ?

- Learning French, in fact like learning another foreign language, is first and foremost a factor for development in anyone's general education, both on the personal level and for the learner's overall knowledge.

- It is a source of individual enrichment in that the learner opens him-/herself up to others, their behavior and relationships.

- It is not only a means of communicating through the respect of cultural diversity, but also a refusal of a single means of expression, a state that leads to intellectual impoverishment and stagnation.

- On the economic level most of all, it offers the possibility of negotiating in the supplier's or customer's language, and rediscovering an obvious fact: "To sell properly, you have to use the consumer's language."

- Finally, it allows access to different economic areas where French still plays a dominant role.

In actual fact, international trade is where learning French can provide an edge—notably in French for business, which is a valuable asset to get a foothold in economic entities where the French language is used.

Today, France's spot in the European Union is made up of 350 million consumers, with 21% of the population speaking French; of the 11 officially-recognized languages, French, with 67 million speaking it, is second only to German (90 million speakers), and in front of English (61 million).

The European Union's role on the world economic stage must not be underestimated. Some of its leaders were claiming, before the Stockholm

summit last March 23-24, that in the coming 10 years the E.U. could claim to be "the post competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy." There is no doubt that this could be regarded as just hubris, nevertheless it is true that the 15 member states are showing a willingness to make the E.U. advance by setting up concrete measures to reduce the economic rigidity which remains, and in particular promoting fast job creation and harmonizing health and welfare protection systems. As these goals are reached, it becomes clear that the E.U. really will become a more and more indispensable partner.

Thanks to the French-speaking economic zone and the perspective of new markets, the French language can both play a crucial role and be an economic asset.

The French-speaking economic zone has the particularity of being intercontinental and gathering together some very different countries. Its reality and potential make it attractive, as it relies on a cultural identity which corresponds to new needs in an unsettled world where everyone is seeking his/her own references.

The French-speaking economic zone corresponds to concrete reality and represents an elemental stake with regards to market opportunities.

The term *Francophonie* refers to those 52 countries who have French in common. This French-speaking commonwealth is made up of 450 million inhabitants—a powerful market force. The French-speaking economic area is: 10% of the world's population, 12% of global production, 17% of international business exchanges, 20% of the world's traffic, more than 1/3 of both the European Economic area's and NAFTA's GNP.

Besides this, economic players do not always measure the significance of this noteworthy asset—this "complementarity"—represented by this economic zone:

- the future possibilities inherent in developing countries such as Vietnam or Romania,
- the know-how and technology of countries like France, Canada and Belgium,
- the reserve of potential consumers in the southern developing countries who are registering strong demographic growth along with a progressive improvement in their standard of living,
- and finally, certain states which have become bridgeheads to new markets (Vietnam in southeast Asia, Lebanon for the middle east, sub-Saharan countries for South Africa, and so on).

It is thus essential to take these cultural data into account, in the framework of global business strategy.

Language allows for multiple identities which, far from isolating the French-speaking world behind linguistic barriers, put it in contact with the rest of the world.

This is even truer, as the French-speaking world does not speak with only one voice. It includes numerous other regional or national languages which in turn build spontaneous relationships with other, non French-speaking peoples, highly profitable from a business point of view. In France for example, the Portuguese, Spanish, north Africans, Chinese and Turks express themselves both in their native tongues and in French and are the keepers of their original culture—they can contribute to creating or strengthening economic or business ties with their home countries.
Business negotiations are also a ritualized relationship which differ according to the country. If they are not always determinant, linguistic affinities make them more direct and easier, and also present the advantage of inscribing the exchange of goods in a common cultural referenc .

A common language therefore favors the development of a shared economic culture. Within the French-speaking economic area and from this point of view, French is a significant tool for bringing people together. Behind the shared language can be found similar legal systems, ethical systems, business practices—even French-speaking economic thought.

Finally, if some firms who wish to conquer foreign markets give in now and then to a certain kind of conformism by using English and give up using French too easily, French-speaking companies feel more or less perplexed as to the need to promote a French-speaking economic area to compete with the natural solidarity that link firms in the English-speaking world.

Thus French, and notably French for business, along with other languages, has serious assets at its disposal, offering real resistance to standardization and promoting cultural diversity.

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The Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in the fields of French for Business, offers a unique certification system with eight different examinations—four in French for Business, and four in French for specific professions (legal French, secretarial French, scientific and technical French, and French for the tourist and hotel industry).

A new examination, the *Certificat de français professionnel* or CFP, is destined for all those who have had or who would like to gain an initial experience to the

French language in a professional context, and who would like to validate their knowledge by means of a certificate. The CFP aims at French from the higher elementary to the intermediate levels, which corresponds roughly to 250-300 hours of learning. It is at the crossroads between the "survival" and "threshold" levels defined by the Council of Europe.

It was specially designed to meet the demand of our American colleagues.

Moreover, the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry has launched a new product, the TEF (Test of French), designed to assess the language skills of non-native speakers of French.

This test offers universities a tool for the assessment of their students' French skills.

Learning the French language has thus become an asset which I think in today's world should not be played down. The winners will be those who possess the knowledge of the language and culture of the country where they wish to kick off.

This is the message from the Paris Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

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